

The Four Noble Truths - Caturārya Satyaya

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These are called **truths** or **satya** in Buddhism in the sense that they **describe the real nature of human life** in the world as well as that they **prescribe solutions** to the **problems human life** generates. The very nature of human life in itself, with its associated day to day changes of wear and tear with growth, old age, disease etc. are said to be not very acceptable to the human mind because what one **believes is one's own** [i. e. derivatives of the **ego**] is continually subject to change. It is unpleasant and disagreeable. In Pali, the word **dukkha** [Sinhala **duka**] is used to refer to this disagreeability. Nevertheless, this is admitted to be the very basic nature of the humans, that they resist it [**sukha-kāmā dukkha-paṭikkūlā** = humans love comfort and dislike and resist discomfort].

This truth about unsatisfactoriness in the life process of humans, namely **dukkha sacca**, is the very first of the Four Noble Truths. Remember, and the Buddha tells you this very clearly, that this is the **very first truth of life** he himself sensed while he was still unenlightened and not yet become the Buddha [**anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattass 'eva sato etadahosi**]. With a keenness of purpose and an equally determined steady application, it is possible for every human to arrive at it. The Buddha wanted us, as true pursuants of Nibbana, to strive for the comprehension of this [**pariññeyyan 'ti**].

Founded on a very scientific basis of causal genesis [**idappaccayatā paṭicca-samuppado**] for his study of the problem of man, the Buddha began by asking himself as to what brings about this unsatisfactoriness or **dukkha** [**kismiṃ sati idaṃ hoti**] in the life of man. There clearly appeared to him the unmistakable answer that it is the **wish of the humans to possess whatever they choose as their own** [which in Pali is rendered as **taṇhā** and is translated into English as **craving, thirsting for** etc etc. And this, man also wants according to his own

wishful thinking, **to be in a static, unchanging condition**, [contrary to the known laws of the universe.]. Thus one of the recurrent statements of the Buddha to the world is that he preaches two things, namely the presence of *dukkha* and its termination or *nirodha* [*dukkhañ cā 'haṃ paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ* MN. I. 40?].

Thus it should now become clear even to a child mind, that this element of grief in what is called *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness in life does **not exist as such in the external world**, by itself. It is generated in the heart [or mind] of man, or wherever the psychic process operates, due to man's own lack of reconciliation to the laws of nature. As an antidote to craving and as a force with which to combat it, Buddhism puts forward the teaching of the three-fold characteristics in the nature of things in the world. It is referred to as three signata or *tilakkhaṇa* [Sinhala *tilakuṇa*].

They are 1. that things of the phenomenal world are all subject to the law of change or *anicca*. If one does not comprehend this truth, one will always run into grief when the inevitable does happen, i.e. the destruction of persons or things takes place, at times when one least expects or suspects them to happen. This is item No. 2 and is called *dukkha* = grief or dissatisfaction. This is no more than ' Hope deferred maketh the heart sick. ' *Dukkha* results in the wake of a reaction process. The philosophical truth No.3 to be discovered out of these two for the sake of a philosophic stability in life, is termed *anatta*, i.e. **absence of an unchanging self-identity** or soullessness in the phenomenon of living. That there is ' **Nothing enduring to hold on to in life nor in the life beyond death.**

Although we have four items in the formal list of Noble Truths, we discover from the above that they historically emerge, and that very naturally, as two in number. The pre-enlightenment Buddha-aspirant or *bodhisatta*, with his keener and more developed sensitivity, becomes aware of the presence of man-made *dukkha* in the world. This is Truth No. 1. It is multi-faceted. He discerns within it birth, aging and decay, disease and death. He sees the misery of it and calls it

lamentable - *kicchaṃ vatā 'yaṃ loko āpanno jāyati ca jīyati ca mīyati ca cavati ca uppajjati ca.*

Then the Buddha aspirant is genuinely motivated to look for **a way of getting out** of the unsatisfactoriness of life process in which humans [*loka*] are caught up, i.e. *nissarana*. It is also referred to as cessation of *dukkha* as it is sometimes called [*dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*]. These are the two items which the Buddha is supposed to carry all the time in his hands, as it were, and deliver to the world as the basics of his teaching - *pubbe c 'āhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ ca paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*. In the more systematised listing of the Truths this latter stands as No.3.

The cause of *dukkha*, i.e. *samudaya*, in the systematised listing, stands as No. 2 The way or *magga* leading to *nirodha* or release in Nibbana finally takes its stand as Truth No. 4. The Buddha aspirant's causal analytical method of approach to the problem of *dukkha* [i.e. his question as to what being present does *dukkha* appear - *kismiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*] revealed the stark reality that **being born into a state of existence** brings all these in its wake [*jātiyā sati idaṃ hoti*]. Whether it is *dukkha* associated with the presence of the physical body or mental states of agony like separation from near and dear ones [*piyehi vippayogo dukkho* etc.], they all emerge from being in a state of existence [*bhava > jāti*].

The final solution to the problem of *dukkha*, well and truly, lies in the termination of the process of 'being born' { *jāti nirodhā jarāmaraṇa - nirodho*}. And this is possible only in the final termination of the **persisting state of existence** or *bhava* [*bhava - nirodhā jāti - nirodho*]. That is why the ecstatic utterance of the Buddha and of all others who following him terminate their *samsāric* suffering reads as 'This is my last birth. I have no more *samsāric* continuance or existence': *Ayaṃ antimā jāti. Natthi 'dāni punabbhavo* [This is my last birth. There is no possibility of my being born again.].

Finally, the Buddha offers in the fourth truth or *magga sacca*, the final solution

to the problem of *dukkha* in life, namely the way out of it. It is the **Noble Eight-fold Path** or *Ariyo Atthangiko Maggo*. There is no other alternative way, neither a shorter one, not even after twenty-five centuries after its first delivery. Of all the cultures and modes of training that take a worldling from *samsāra* to Nirvana [or death to deathlessness], the **Buddhist Path alone counts on self-reliance and self-endeavour** to bring about the **necessary spiritual culture and development for this purpose**. Grace from no higher power outside oneself operates in the Buddhist scheme of salvation.

How then does the Noble Eightfold Path operate in Buddhism? It undoubtedly is a ladder of spiritual ascent. It **implies an upward successive and progressive movement**. It moves from the mundane to the transcendental [*lokiya* to *lokuttara*]. It begins with *sammā diṭṭhi* or corrected vision as step No. 1, providing the essential link between the average non-Buddhist worldling and the converted new Buddhist [**not the born Buddhist because his parents happen to be labelled as such**]. The possession of *sammā diṭṭhi* or corrected vision provides the new convert with the road map, as it were, indicating the road along which he should proceed to get to the desired goal of Nibbana. None other than the great stalwart in the *Sāsana*, Thera Sariputta tells us how to acquire that. There are two causes for the arising of *sammā diṭṭhi* [*dve paccayā sammā diṭṭhiyā uppādāya*]. This correct vision of the *dhamma* must be authoritatively had **from a reliable source** [*parato ghoso*. MN. I.].

There is no provision in early Buddhist thinking for such perfected knowledge as is implied by the word *paññā* to descend into a person from outside. But within a person, such knowledge shall also not lie static. The basics of the religion acquired through an external source has to be subjected to further study, to personal examination and investigation [*yoniso ca manasikāro*]. One has to dwell upon that vision and personalize it in one's own life. This is by no means *paññā* or transcendental wisdom at the initial stage. One gains it only after the attainment of *sammā samādhi* which alone opens the way to the required

wisdom of *paññā*.

We see now very clearly the emergence from this idea of corrected vision or *sammā dīṭṭhi*, of the stage No.2 of the Path, namely of **correctly structured Buddhist patterns of thinking** or *sammā saṅkappa*. This is said to be successively derived from the preceding stage No.1 of *sammā dīṭṭhi* [*sammā dīṭṭhissa sammā saṅkappo pahoti*]. In the light of all these points of doctrine presented so far it seems untenable to speak of the Eight-fold Path as being comparable to a rope with eight strands which present themselves simultaneously, all at the same time.

Admittedly, *sammā dīṭṭhi* leads the way all the time in Buddhist culture [*pubbaṅgamā*], having illumined the Path to the Buddhist. Thereafter, during all stages of living the Path in terms of *vācā* [speech], *kammanto* [activity] and *ājīvo* [livelihood], the guiding factor of *sammā dīṭṭhi* as well as accompanying elements of mindfulness [*sati*] and endeavour [*vāyāma*] are said to be necessary for their successful growth. But every student of Buddhism has to know that *sammā vāyāma* and *sammā sati*, as independent members of the Path, have to grow in their **own stature**.

Once a Buddhist disciple has traversed this Path of eight successive stages, he invariably realises that two more stages lie ahead of him as rewards for the training he has been through. In all processes of Buddhist culture like the three-fold *sikkhā*, *samādhi* lies in between *sīla* and *paññā*. So on the Path too, once *samādhi* has been achieved as No.8, wisdom referred to as *ñāṇa* or *paññā*, as No. 9, is readily available as the reward for the training undergone so far. Even on the way of *Jhānas* in Buddhism, we are told that when the mind is in a state of *samādhi* at the fourth *jhāna* [*evaṃ samāhite citte ...*] one is in a position to strive for the achievement of wisdom [*samāhite ... ñāṇadssaṇāya cīttam abhininnāmeti*. DN. I.].

It is for this reason that it is said that the attainment of *arahant hood* is said to be the product of a **ten-fold achievement** [*dasahi aṅgehi samannāgato arahā ' ti*

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vuccati. Mahācattārīsaka Sutta at MN.]. It is well beyond the Path, proceeding past **samādhi** as No. 8, to No. 9 in **ñāṇa** [or **paññā**] and finally to No. 10 in **vimutti** or release.